

1921-1928

## THE DAWN OF A NEW DAY

**I**n 1921, the new president, Warren G. Harding, usually regarded as one of the worst presidents of the United States, appointed a new postmaster general, Will H. Hays, to succeed the much-hated Burlison.

Four days after taking office, Hays electrified all postal employees with this proclamation:

*Every effort shall be exercised to humanize the ... [post office department]. Labor is not a commodity... There are 300,000 employees. They have the brain[s] and they have the hand[s] to do the job well; and they shall have the heart to do it well.*

Seven days later, on March 16, Hays invited the president of the NALC, Edward J. Gainor, and the leaders of other postal organizations to meet for informal discussions. At the meeting, he announced an open-door policy to the leaders of the postal unions and invited them to see him whenever they had a problem.

Letter carriers responded enthusiastically to Hays' proclamation and his positive attitude toward the NALC. The April 1921 issue of *The Postal Record* described the outpouring of good feeling in an article entitled "The Dawn of a New Day":



*When one emerges from a dungeon into the sunlight, one is temporarily blinded and confused. Letter carriers and other postal employees are in a similar situation.... The selection of Mr. Hays of the word "humanize" in expressing the Department's attitude toward the men and women workers in the postal establishment, was happy.... Not in years has such a sentiment been expressed by a head of this Department. How strange and yet how sweet!*

To improve the working conditions of postal employees, Hays sought to develop a closer relationship with representatives from the various postal employees' organizations. To this end, he established a National Welfare Council—later called the National Service Relations Council. The national president and secretary of the NALC both played an active role in the activities of the Council right from its inception in 1921. In fact, NALC Secretary Edward Cantwell served as the Executive of the Council from its inauguration until his death in 1924.

On the national level, the National Service Relations Council discussed topics directly related to the welfare of city delivery letter carriers such as uniforms, the possibility of a Christmas holiday, working conditions within local post offices, cafeterias, credit unions, and free physical examinations for workers. Local Welfare Councils were also established to focus

on conditions within individual post offices, including such issues as drinking fountains, swing rooms, dust, sanitation and lighting.

Will Hays remained in office only one year.

Although no important legislation affecting letter carriers was passed by Congress during his year in office, Hays' commitment to improving the working lives of letter carriers and his belief that improvement in conditions and morale would improve delivery service for the American people left a lasting legacy.

When Hays resigned, the NALC continued its tradition of honoring friends by making Hays an honorary lifetime member of the NALC. Pleased, yet uncomfortable with the term "honorary," Hays asked to become a regular dues-paying member instead. The NALC Constitution did not permit anyone to pay dues who had not earned that right by carrying the mail, but an exception was made for Will Hays—a member of the NALC until his death in 1954.



## NALC BANDS

“One need but read the branch items ... to note how the finished and altogether admirable work of these bands feature in many demonstrations held under the auspices of this Association. They grace banquets, entertainments and social sessions. They enliven a smoker.... And on the occasion of our great national conventions where, happily, many Letter Carriers' Bands

invariably lend their presence, they give zest and color to the gathering....”

This glowing tribute in 1922 by NALC Secretary Edward J. Cantwell aptly describes the activities of the letter carrier bands over the years, especially during the union's formative decades. Musically gifted carriers first organized letter carrier bands in the late 19th century, which came together in massive parades during

the union's early national conventions.

Over the past several decades, the bands' importance has diminished since few band members are letter carriers, and convention parades are no longer held. Nonetheless, a sizable number of bands remain to perform at conventions and local events, thus preserving the union's traditions of music and service.



National Postal Museum Library

A parcel post carrier from Indianapolis in 1923.

## A CHANGE IN TACTICS

**A**lthough Hays' term of office was brief, his administration set the tone for relations between the NALC and the Department for the rest of the decade. As a result of this climate of mutual respect, the NALC—which by this time had created one of the most successful lobbies on Capitol Hill—decided to seize the offensive in the fall of 1923 when it embarked on a major campaign to achieve a living wage for postal

employees. This campaign, led by the NALC but waged by all the postal unions, was one of the biggest in the history of postal unionism.

Letter carriers' wages in the early 1920s were miserably inadequate. The 1920 salary bill—which had raised letter carrier salaries to between \$1,400 and \$1,800 per year—was obsolete the day it was passed. And in the rapidly expanding economy of the early 1920s, the wages of letter carriers and other postal workers lagged further and further behind the wages of workers in the private sector.

The salary campaign opened at the NALC's 24th Biennial Convention in 1923 in Providence, Rhode Island, and spread to every congressional district in the country. Acting on the advice of NALC National Headquarters, many local branches formed special campaign committees and enlisted the support of local associations of postal clerks, rural letter carriers, railway mail clerks, and even supervisory officials. These committees presented their case to patrons, Boards of Commerce, representatives and senators. Mass meetings

## THE SUB BY B.F. ELLISON JR., LOS ANGELES

See that poor ragged  
Hungry looking guy,  
Working when he can  
And trying to get by!  
Wondering how and where  
He'll get his next grub—  
Folks call him "The Mail Man,"  
But he's just a Sub.

He goes home at night  
To his wife and his child  
Ashamed of his plight  
And more worries pile;  
His purpose beaten  
By fate's blunt cruel club—  
Folks call him "The Mail Man,"  
But he's just a Sub.

But, what does he get—  
He's done no one harm;  
The rain and the wet,  
The snow and the storm,  
Still he does his best  
Though he plays the dub—  
Folks call him "The Mail Man,"  
But he's just a Sub.

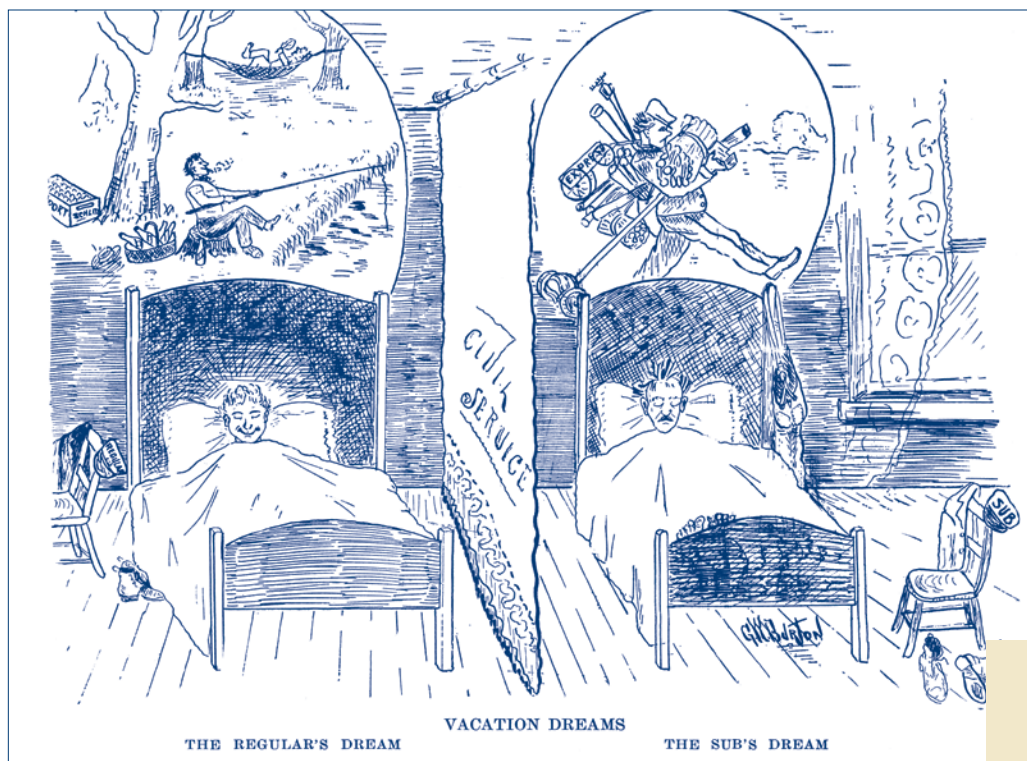
Of course he's a man—  
A good worker, too,  
But often he's told:  
"There's nothing to do."  
When in fact there is—  
Piles, in many a tub—  
Folks call him "The Mail Man,"  
But he's just a Sub.

Reports for duty  
Real early at dawn,  
Waits and hangs around  
Till the Regulars are gone.  
He's treated just like  
A cigarette stub—  
Folks call him "The Mail Man,"  
But he's just a Sub.

"No Work Today,"  
But I stuck around  
In hopes they would say  
For you work's been found,  
But useless it was  
They gave me the rub—  
Folks call me "The Mail Man,"  
But I'm just a Sub.

Nice little dainties  
For kiddies to eat—  
Good wholesome food  
And much needed meat—  
How can he buy them?  
No money, poor cub—  
Folks call him "The Mail Man,"  
But he's just a Sub.

Isn't there some way  
To lighten his load  
So he can pay—  
The bills he has owed?  
Sure, he's a good sport  
But tires of being snubbed—  
Folks call him "The Mail Man,"  
But he's just a Sub.



of postal employees were held in cities and towns as diverse as Piqua, Ohio, and New York City. A letter carrier from Pittsburgh proclaimed “\$2,400 or bust” in *The Postal Record*, and added:

*The days for idle talk are past, and the time for action is here. Let every postal employee take a hand in this affair, and make the halls of Congress echo and re-echo with the voice of the people.*

The campaign was so effective that some members of Congress, irritated with the tidal wave of letters supporting a wage increase, criticized the NALC and the other postal organizations. Nevertheless, in June 1924, a bill was passed that increased wages by \$300 a year to a maximum level of \$2,100 and raised substitutes’ wages to 65 cents an hour. Not only did the bill pass, but it passed by overwhelming majorities: 73-3 in the Senate and 361-6 in the House.

The NALC’s success was short-lived—despite widespread support for the bill, President Coolidge vetoed it. And the veto took a particularly damaging form: Congress received the veto message the same day it adjourned for the fall elections, making it impossible to override the president’s action.

By the time the Congress reassembled on December 1, 1924, the mood and temper were different. William C. Doherty, later the president of the NALC, described the congressional about-face: “They did not love us in December as they did in June.” The NALC and other postal organizations lobbied frantically but, in the end, failed to obtain the necessary support. Coolidge’s veto was sustained by a single vote in the Senate on January 6, 1925.

Although disappointed, the NALC did not give up as it made clear in the July 1924 *Postal Record*:

*The salary campaign will go on to successful conclusion.... We will march on to certain success. Thrice armed is he whose cause is just. We will not fail.*

On February 28, 1925—after a renewed campaign of intensive lobbying—the NALC and the other postal unions won the wage fight when Coolidge reluctantly signed new legislation that incorporated the salary provisions of the earlier bill.

*In the rapidly expanding economy of the early 1920s, the wages of letter carriers and other postal workers lagged further and further behind the wages of workers in the private sector.*